

GOWER REMEMBERS

Private Leonard Evans

(1893-1916)



I regret to inform you that the Record Office of the First Newfoundland Regiment, London, to-day advises that No. 658, Private Leonard Evans, was Killed in Action on the 11th October. (Letter to Jabez Evans, Leonard's father, from Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary, John R. Bennett, October 27, 1916)

Leonard Evans was born in Bay Roberts in 1893, the son of Elizabeth and Jabez Evans. He was one of the youngest of a large number of brothers and sister born into the family. His father was a fisherman, originally from Western Bay, who fished out of Bay Roberts for many years before relocating to St. John's around 1895.

Leonard received some formal education but there is no substantial information about him until he enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on December 14, 1914, Regimental number 658. His younger brother, Thomas, also enlisted on that day or a day or two previous, as his Regimental number was 642. Leonard's Attestation Paper relates that he was 5 feet, 3 inches tall, and weighed 120 pounds. He had a dark complexion, with black hair and grey eyes. It was also noted that he had been vaccinated in 1910 but it does not give the type of vaccination. He was employed as a steward, probably on either the train or one of the coastal boats, at a salary of \$25.00 per month.

He was one of 244 recruits assigned to C Company and travelled to Europe on board the SS *Dominion*, which left Newfoundland waters off Bay Bulls on February 5, 1915. Because of the amount and thickness of the ice in St. John's harbour, the men of C Company had to be ferried out through the Narrows and south to Bay Bulls on the sealing vessel *Neptune* to rendezvous with and be transferred to the *Dominion*. After eleven days at sea, the *Dominion* arrived in Liverpool, England, on February 16, and the men were put on board a train to Edinburgh, Scotland, that same day. Once there, they were assigned to duty at Edinburgh Castle. They were soon joined by A and B companies, which had been in training at Fort George, Scotland, since December 1914. The Newfoundland Regiment was the first colonial force assigned duty at the historic castle.

Once their assignment at Edinburgh Castle was completed, the Newfoundland Regiment continued its training at Stobs Camp, Scotland, before they were transferred to Aldershot in the south of England, on August 2. It was while stationed there that they learned that they would soon be off to the eastern Mediterranean where they would be part of the British Expeditionary Force in Turkey. Eighteen days later, Evans, together with just over 1,000 of his comrades, boarded the HMT *Megantic* at nearby Devonport.

The Newfoundland Regiment arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, on August 31, and after a period of acclimatization, sailed north aboard the *Ausonia* for Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. From there they travelled on the night of September 19-20 to Suvla Bay on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula, where they were greeted by heavy shellfire from the Turks. The Newfoundland Regiment spent approximately four months at Suvla Bay, under the most inhospitable conditions. Thirty-one died in action or from wounds received, while another 15 succumbed to one of a number of diseases. Eighty soldiers were wounded by shell fire or snipers bullets; hundreds of others had to be evacuated for medical reasons, including frostbite, the latter a result of a harsh winter storm that descended upon the area during November. When the time came for the Regiment to withdraw from Suvla Bay in early January 1916, their numbers had been reduced to some 400 active soldiers.

Evans was one of the soldiers evacuated from Gallipoli for medical reasons. On October 11, less than one month after arriving there, he was taken aboard the hospital ship *Neuralia* suffering from severe dysentery. The ship headed for Egypt, where on October 15, he was admitted to the Citadel Military Hospital in Cairo. He remained there for several months, not rejoining his unit until January 26, 1916. By then, the Newfoundland Regiment had been evacuated from

Gallipoli and was in Cairo, for a period of rest and recuperation, before heading for the Western Front.

The Newfoundland Regiment left Egypt on board the transport ship *Alaunia* on March 14, 1916, and arrived in Marseille, France, on the 22nd. Then they were taken by train north to the French village of Pont Remy on the Western Front. There they spent the spring and early summer getting ready for what was dubbed the Big Push, an all-out, full-scale attack on the German front line stretching for several miles along the banks of the Somme River. That attack finally occurred on the morning of July 1. Of the 801 members of the Newfoundland Regiment which went over the top at Beaumont Hamel, 233 were killed or died of wounds, 386 wounded and 91 were missing and presumed dead, resulting in a casualty rate of 85%.

Evans did not see action that morning at Beaumont Hamel. He was one of the 10% of the Regiment held back from the fighting. This was common practice in British regiments to have a base to rebuild from in case of major casualties, as had happened to the Newfoundland Regiment. As it turns out, he may not have been in the best of health at the time of the attack, as he was admitted to the 4th Casualty Clearing Station near the area of the fighting on July 27, with pyrexia (high fever) of unknown cause. He was transferred to the military hospital at Etaples, France, the following day and he remained there until August 8, when he rejoined the Regiment at the Base Depot at Rouen, France. Ironically, that day, August 8, 1916, was the first time the Newfoundland Regiment encountered a German gas attack, while taking part in trench repair work near Ypres, Belgium.

The Battle of the Somme continued throughout the summer and fall of 1916, with some of the heaviest fighting taking place at Gueudecourt, France, in October. It was there that the Newfoundland

Regiment re-entered the fighting, engaging the enemy in the field on October 10. The fighting lasted for the better part of two days, and resulted in 239 casualties, 120 of whom were killed in action or later died of wounds received. One of the dead was Leonard Evans, who lost his life on October 11. His parents were notified of his death by letter from the Colonial Secretary, John R. Bennett, some sixteen days later on October 27. His body was never found and his name is emblazoned on the memorial walls at Beaumont Hamel Park, with more than 800 of his comrades who have no known grave. There are replicas of these walls at Bowring Park in St. John's

At the time of his death, Evans' estate was valued at £20/14/10, approximately \$1,800.00 US in today's currency. The following summer, in a letter dated June 20, 1917, Evans' parents were sent a cheque for \$110.94, "being the balance of the estate of your late son". That amount was slightly higher, having the buying power of approximately \$2,200.00 US in 2016.

In response to the outpouring of sympathy they received once news of their son's death had reached them, Evans' parents posted the following **NOTE OF THANKS** in *The Evening Telegram* for November 21, 1916:

Mr. and Mrs. Jabez Evans and family desire to express their sincere thanks to His Excellency the Governor and Lady Davidson, Rt. Hon. E. P. Morris, Hon. J. R. Bennett, Col. Secretary, and Miss Winnie Snow, Bay Roberts, for notes of condolence received on the death of their dear son Leonard killed in action "Somewhere in France" Oct. 11th, 1916, and to many other kind friends for expressions of sympathy.

His family also erected a headstone in his memory in the family plot at the General Protestant Cemetery on Topsail Road.

Leonard Evans' mother died on June 25, 1919, at age 69. The following year his father inserted a short verse in memory of his son in *The Evening Telegram* for October 30, 1920. It read:

In Loving Memory of my dear son, Private Leonard Evans, killed Somewhere in France, the 11th day of October 1916.

*Brave boy we mourn your faith,
Your life was wholly given;
Far from home and far from friends
You gave up earth for heaven.
No stone may mark the place
Where my soldier boy is laid;
But in my heart he has a place,
A spot of memory made.*

[Image on page one courtesy of The Rooms Provincial Archives
Division: C3-95]

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately the next four years. On roughly every second Sunday from now through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.

We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we begin our 201st year as a faith community.

If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.